

Fluctuating hydrogen-bond networks govern anomalous electron transfer kinetics in a blue copper protein

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Edited by Michael L. Klein, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, and approved May 4, 2018 (received for review April 3, 2018)

We combine experimental and computational methods to address the anomalous kinetics of long-range electron transfer (ET) in mutants of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* azurin. ET rates and driving forces for wild type (WT) and three N47X mutants (X = L, S, and D) of Ru(2,2'-bipyridine)₂(imidazole)(His83) azurin are reported. An enhanced ET rate for the N47L mutant suggests either an increase of the donor–acceptor (DA) electronic coupling or a decrease in the reorganization energy for the reaction. The underlying atomistic features are investigated using a recently developed nonadiabatic molecular dynamics method to simulate ET in each of the azurin mutants, revealing unexpected aspects of DA electronic coupling. In particular, WT azurin and all studied mutants exhibit more DA compression during ET (>2 Å) than previously recognized. Moreover, it is found that DA compression involves an extended network of hydrogen bonds, the fluctuations of which gate the ET reaction, such that DA compression is facilitated by transiently rupturing hydrogen bonds. It is found that the N47L mutant intrinsically disrupts this hydrogen-bond network, enabling particularly facile DA compression. This work, which reveals the surprisingly fluctuational nature of ET in azurin, suggests that hydrogen-bond networks can modulate the efficiency of long-range biological ET.

electron transfer | azurin | ring polymer molecular dynamics | Marcus theory | protein dynamics

Electron transfer (ET) is of central importance in biological processes ranging from photosynthesis to respiration (1–6). Understanding the mechanisms by which biochemical systems facilitate efficient ET is essential for the elucidation of biochemical pathways and development of biomimetic catalysts.

Extensive investigations of Ru-modified derivatives of the blue copper protein azurin have shed light on the factors that control long-range biological ET (7, 8). Notably, the copper site in azurin is tuned for efficient ET with a low reaction activation energy (8, 9). Extensive mutagenesis studies have also been performed for this ET process, the results of which have been explained in terms of either the effect of individual residues on the Cu reduction potential (10–15) or the ET reorganization energy (16, 17). This previous work was consistently explained using the Marcus theory of ET subject to the assumption that the donor–acceptor (DA) electronic coupling for the ET reaction is unaffected by the mutations. Mutagenesis studies that account for changes in the DA coupling are less common and either assume static protein configurations or include only protein fluctuations in the reactant basin (18–20).

The current work explores mutations at the N47 site of Ru(2,2'-bipyridine)₂(imidazole)(His83) azurin (i.e., Ru-azurin). Both ET rates and Cu reduction potentials for wild type (WT) and three mutants (N47D, N47S, and N47L) are measured. The motivation for exploring residue 47 is that this asparagine participates in an extended hydrogen-bonding network that stabilizes

the “rigid rack” for the Cu center in the protein (8–12, 21). A representative configuration of WT azurin in Fig. 1 shows the location of asparagine-47 between the two metal centers.

Unlike previous mutagenesis studies, the observed reactions cannot be explained using standard Marcus theory without accounting for the important role of protein fluctuations in the ET reaction mechanism. To understand these effects and to elucidate the protein motions that accompany ET in these azurin mutants, we use a recently developed nonadiabatic simulation technique, kinetically constrained ring polymer molecular dynamics (KC-RPMD). KC-RPMD is a Feynman path-integral method that enables the simulation of electronically nonadiabatic processes using classical trajectories; it accurately describes condensed-phase ET reaction dynamics and mechanisms across the normal, barrierless, and inverted regimes including the weak electronic-coupling regime associated with long-range ET (22, 23). The main benefit of the methodology is that it allows for the unbiased simulation of the ET dynamics, accounting for the full range of protein fluctuations that accompany the ET reaction.

Results and Discussion

Experimentally determined Cu reduction potentials and ET rates for WT azurin and the three mutants are shown in Table 1. Also reported is the driving force, ΔG^0 , for each ET reaction,

Significance

Protein fluctuations and hydrogen-bond networks play an important—although incompletely understood—role in facilitating efficient biological electron transfer (ET). Experimental mutagenesis results provide evidence for the role of protein motions in Ru-modified azurin ET, a quintessential example of biological ET. A recently developed nonadiabatic molecular dynamics method allows for exploration of the nature of protein fluctuations, providing insight into the conformational motions that accompany ET in Ru-modified azurin. In particular, a fluctuating hydrogen-bond network is identified that transiently ruptures to allow for donor–acceptor compression during ET.

Author contributions: J.S.K., N.B., J.J.W., J.R.W., H.B.G., and T.F.M. designed research; J.S.K., N.B., and J.J.W. performed research; J.S.K., N.B., J.J.W., J.R.W., H.B.G., and T.F.M. analyzed data; and J.S.K., N.B., J.J.W., J.R.W., H.B.G., and T.F.M. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1805719115/-DCSupplemental.

Published online May 29, 2018.

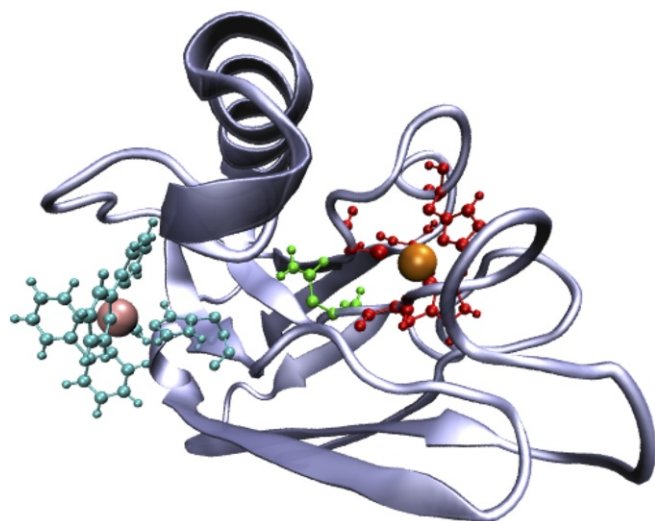


Fig. 1. Representative configuration of WT azurin. ET occurs from the Cu center (large orange sphere) to the Ru center (large pink sphere). The Ru center is attached to the protein exterior at H83 (shown in cyan along with the Ru ligands); the Cu ligands are shown in red, and asparagine residue 47 is highlighted in green.

obtained from the measured Cu reduction potentials and the known Ru reduction potential, $E^0(\text{Ru}^{\text{III}}/\text{Ru}^{\text{II}}) = 1.0$ V vs. the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE) (8). The mutations at residue 47 significantly affect both the driving force and overall ET rate. Notably, while all three mutants show a decrease in the driving force for the reaction in comparison with WT, only N47D and N47S exhibit a decrease in the ET rate; the rate for N47L is enhanced relative to WT.

To disentangle the effect of the driving force on the ET reaction rate, the experimentally measured kinetics parameters are analyzed using the standard ET rate constant expression from Marcus theory (24–27),

$$k_{\text{MT}} = \frac{2\pi}{\hbar} H_{\text{AB}}^2 (4\pi\lambda k_{\text{B}} T)^{-1/2} \exp \left[-\frac{(\lambda + \Delta G^0)^2}{4\lambda k_{\text{B}} T} \right], \quad [1]$$

where H_{AB} is the DA electronic coupling between the donor and acceptor, λ is the reorganization energy, and ΔG^0 is the driving force. Isolating the contribution from the driving force, we assume that all other parameters are unaffected by mutation, including λ and H_{AB} , such that the relative rate for a given mutant vs. WT is

$$\frac{k_{\text{MT}}}{k_{\text{MT}}^{\text{WT}}} = \exp \left[-\frac{(\lambda_{\text{WT}} + \Delta G^0)^2 - (\lambda_{\text{WT}} + \Delta G_{\text{WT}}^0)^2}{4\lambda_{\text{WT}} k_{\text{B}} T} \right], \quad [2]$$

where $\Delta G_{\text{WT}}^0 = -0.70$ eV (Table 1) and $\lambda_{\text{WT}} = 0.8$ eV (28). Table 2 compares the ratio of ET rates measured from experiment, k/k_{WT} , to the ratio obtained using Eq. 2. For two of the mutations, N47D and N47S, the trend from this application of Marcus theory is consistent with the experimentally observed rates, with both mutations leading to lower rates. However, N47L shows clear enhancement of the observed ET rate compared with the prediction based solely on the change in driving force (Eq. 2). This suggests that an additional aspect of protein motion plays an important role in the ET rates.

To investigate the atomistic features governing the rate enhancement, KC-RPMD is used to simulate the nonadiabatic ET in both WT azurin and the investigated mutants. The KC-RPMD simulations use a fully atomistic representation of the

metalloprotein, with over 15,000 atoms including explicit solvent. A two-state molecular mechanics force field, which is parameterized to fit WT experimental data, is used to describe the protein in the ET reactant and product diabatic states; the force field additionally describes the electronic coupling, $H_{\text{AB}}(\mathbf{R})$, which explicitly depends on the distance between the Ru and Cu metal centers. All simulation details are provided in *Materials and Methods* and *SI Appendix*, sections S1 and S2.

Although KC-RPMD has been demonstrated to accurately describe ET across a broad range of electronic-coupling, driving-force, and solvent-coupling regimes (22, 23), the calculations converge with fewer trajectories when applied with a physically reasonable dividing surface (29). Throughout this work we use the “kink-pair” dividing surface in KC-RPMD (22, 23), which rapidly converges for ET reactions in the weak-coupling regime. This dividing surface corresponds to the ensemble of configurations for which the reactant and product electronic diabats are degenerate and weighted according to both the Boltzmann distribution and the magnitude of the DA electronic coupling, such that in the weak-coupling regime

$$P(\mathbf{R}) \approx H_{\text{AB}}^2(\mathbf{R}) e^{-V_{\text{A}}(\mathbf{R})/k_{\text{B}} T} \Big|_{V_{\text{A}}(\mathbf{R})=V_{\text{B}}(\mathbf{R})}, \quad [3]$$

where $P(\mathbf{R})$ is the probability of a nuclear configuration \mathbf{R} and $V_{\text{A}}(\mathbf{R})$ and $V_{\text{B}}(\mathbf{R})$ are the reactant and product potential energy surfaces, respectively. *SI Appendix*, Fig. S1 demonstrates that fewer than 8% of KC-RPMD trajectories undergo dynamical recrossing when initialized from the kink-pair dividing surface for WT azurin and for all mutants; this result confirms that the bottleneck for the ET reaction is well described by the kink-pair dividing surface, and it further indicates that the ET rate is accurately described by a Marcus-type transition-state rate theory of the form

$$k_{\text{KC}} = \frac{2\pi}{\hbar} \langle H_{\text{AB}} \rangle_{\text{KC}}^2 (4\pi\lambda_{\text{KC}} k_{\text{B}} T)^{-1/2} \times \exp \left[-\frac{(\lambda_{\text{KC}} + \Delta G^0)^2}{4\lambda_{\text{KC}} k_{\text{B}} T} \right], \quad [4]$$

where $\langle H_{\text{AB}} \rangle_{\text{KC}}$ is the average electronic coupling at the kink-pair dividing surface and λ_{KC} is the outer-sphere reorganization energy calculated using KC-RPMD. A more detailed description of the rate-law analysis is provided in *SI Appendix*, section S4.

Table 2 gives the ET rates obtained using KC-RPMD, as well as the breakdown of the contributions to the rate in terms of the calculated outer-sphere reorganization energy and average electronic coupling. As anticipated, the outer-sphere reorganization energies computed from the KC-RPMD simulations confirm that this quantity is unaffected by the considered mutations. In contrast, while the WT, N47S, and N47D have almost identical values of the average electronic coupling, the value for N47L is markedly larger, fully accounting for the observed rate enhancement of N47L. Finally, we note that the relative KC-RPMD rates are in good agreement with experiment, suggesting that analysis of the contributions to the KC-RPMD rate will yield insight

Table 1. Experimentally determined copper reduction potentials E^0 ($\text{Cu}^{\text{II/I}}$) vs. NHE, ET driving forces ΔG^0 , and ET rates k , for WT azurin and mutants

Mutant	E^0 ($\text{Cu}^{\text{II/I}}$)/V	ΔG^0 /eV	$k \cdot \text{s}^{-1} \cdot 10^{-5}$
WT	0.30(2)	−0.70(2)	11(2)
N47D	0.38(2)	−0.62(2)	5.2(7)
N47S	0.42(2)	−0.58(2)	2.5(2)
N47L	0.44(2)	−0.56(2)	21(4)

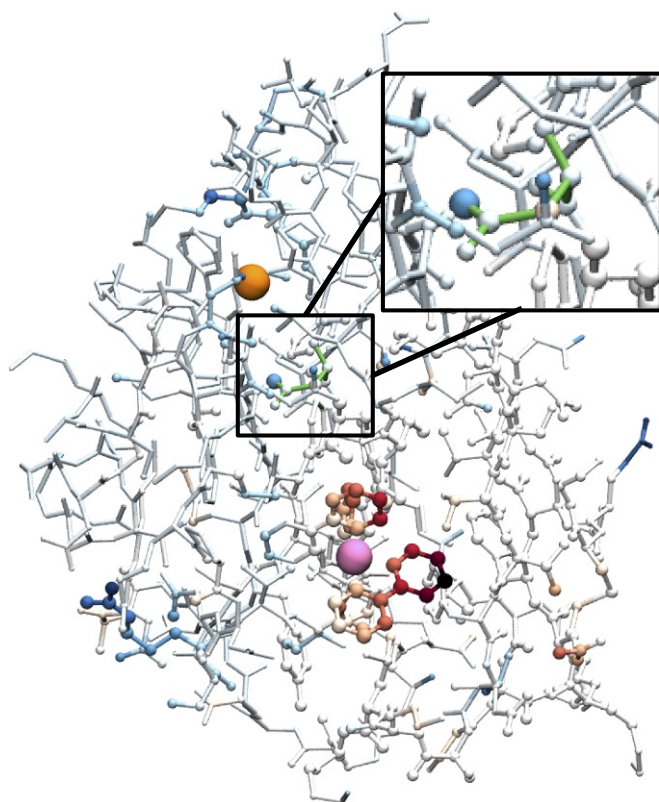


Fig. 3. The WT crystal structure with Cu (orange) and Ru (pink) indicated. The size and color of the remaining atoms are scaled according to the difference in distance from the atom to the Cu center in the reactant basin and dividing surface; blue/red indicates farther from/closer to Cu at the dividing surface than in the reactant basin. Inset expands the N47 region.

key features of the ET conformational gating in WT azurin are illustrated in Fig. 6, which depicts the distribution of Ru–Cu distances [$P(d)$, black curve] and electronic coupling [$H_{AB}(d)$, green curve]. The red portion of the distribution indicates the thermally accessible configurations in the reactant basin, which exhibit an extended Ru–Cu distance, a small electronic coupling, and a well-formed hydrogen-bonding network involving residue N47. Given the strong distance dependence of the electronic coupling on DA distance, the ET process is most favorable from configurations in which the system fluctuates to compressed DA distances, indicated by the blue region, which involves disrupting the hydrogen-bond network in the WT azurin. Because the N47L mutant intrinsically disrupts this hydrogen-bond network, DA compression is more facile, leading to the accessibility of configurations with substantially shorter DA distances (Fig. 2) and thus faster ET reaction rates. We note that although this mechanistic explanation was made possible with all-atom nonadiabatic simulations, the basic interpretation of the experimentally observed trends does not hinge on the details of the force field or the form of the electronic coupling, beyond the robust assumption that the electronic coupling is strongly dependent upon the DA distance.

Finally, we show that the experimentally observed trends for the ET rates are poorly explained without explicit inclusion of the DA compression that gates the ET reaction, even when a more sophisticated description of the electronic coupling is used. Previous theoretical work illustrated the dynamical nature of azurin, but modeled ET on the assumption that the reaction proceeds from the ensemble of configurations in the reactant basin (i.e., without inclusion of the DA compression discussed here) (30–33). Table 3 presents the relative ET rates, k_A/k_A^{WT} , obtained

using Eq. 4 but with the average value of the electronic coupling calculated in the reactant basin instead of at the dividing surface. The results calculated in this way fail to capture the anomalous enhancement of the N47L rate. When the electronic coupling is calculated using the Pathways model (34–36), which is more sophisticated than the simple exponential form of the coupling (Eq. 6) that is otherwise used in this study, the estimate of the N47L rate is in even greater disagreement with experiment. These results highlight that capturing the experimentally observed trends in azurin demands explicit inclusion of DA compression during the ET reaction, as in the KC-RPMD simulations reported here.

Concluding Remarks

We present a combined experimental and computational study to elucidate the kinetics and conformational fluctuations associated with ET in Ru-modified *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* azurin.

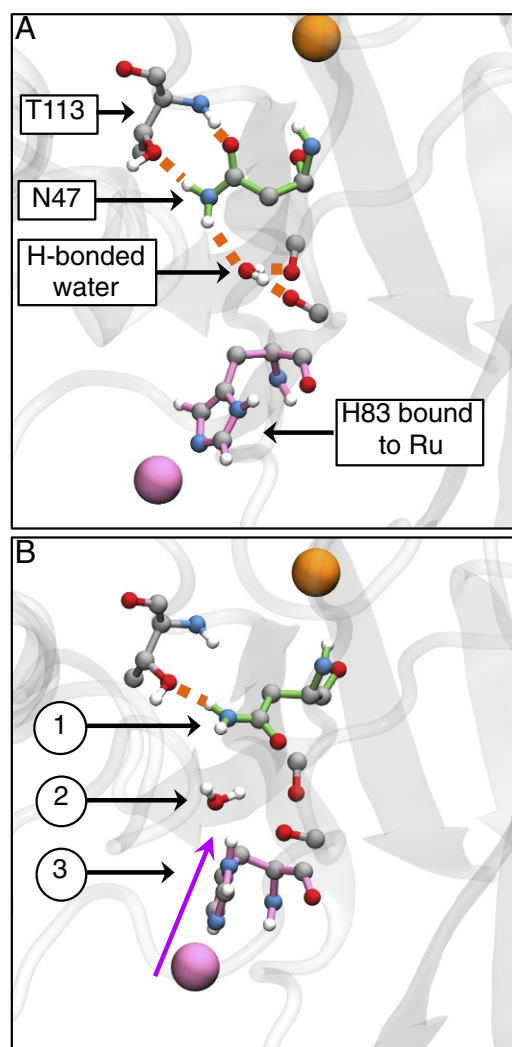


Fig. 4. Representative WT configurations from KC-RPMD simulations illustrating the hydrogen-bonding network in the pocket surrounding residue 47. (A) The reactant basin exhibits a hydrogen-bond network between N47, the neighboring T113, a water molecule present in the pocket between N47 and H83, and nearby backbone oxygens. (B) The dividing surface is characterized by changes that include (1) breaking of the hydrogen bonds around N47, (2) displacement of the water molecule from the pocket, and (3) compression of H83 into the pocket. Hydrogen bonds are indicated by orange-dashed lines, the Cu center is in orange, residue 47 is highlighted in green, and the Ru center and H83 are highlighted in pink.

500 nm pump light and monitored using a white-light probe or 632.8 nm light from a HeNe continuous-wave laser. Established flash-quench conditions were used in all TA experiments (40). Full details of the experimental procedures can be found in *SI Appendix, section S5*.

Calculation Details. All KC-RPMD simulations were performed at 300 K using a modified version of the Gromacs-5.0 molecular dynamics package (41). The potential energy surfaces used to define the ET reactant and product states are based on the GROMOS 53a6 force field (42) with additional terms to describe the interactions of the metal centers and the ET driving force. These additions are parameterized on the basis of WT experimental data; no additional potential energy fitting was performed for the mutants. Full details are provided in *SI Appendix, sections S1 and S2*.

The KC-RPMD equations of motion used to simulate the nonadiabatic ET dynamics are (22, 23)

$$\begin{aligned}\dot{y}_j &= -\frac{1}{m_j} \frac{\partial}{\partial R_j} V_{\text{eff}}(\mathbf{R}, y) \\ \dot{v}_y &= -\frac{1}{m_y} \frac{\partial}{\partial y} V_{\text{eff}}(\mathbf{R}, y) - \gamma_y v_y + \psi(t) \sqrt{2\gamma_y m_y k_B T},\end{aligned}\quad [5]$$

which correspond to the classical limit for the nuclei. The position, velocity, and mass of nuclear coordinate j are indicated by R_j , v_j , and m_j , respectively, and the vector of nuclear positions is \mathbf{R} . The auxiliary electronic variable

in KC-RPMD reports on nonadiabatic transitions between electronic states and is described by position y , velocity v_y , and mass m_y . It is coupled to a Langevin bath with friction coefficient γ_y ; $\psi(t)$ is a normal Gaussian random variable. Additional KC-RPMD details are provided in *SI Appendix, section S3*.

The electronic coupling, $H_{AB}(d)$, is modeled using an exponential form that depends on the distance between the Ru and Cu metal centers, d ,

$$H_{AB}(d) = H_{AB}^0 \exp[-\beta(d - d^0)], \quad [6]$$

using the experimentally determined values of $H_{AB}^0 = 186 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, $d^0 = 3 \text{ \AA}$, and $\beta = 1.1 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ for all mutants (8, 28).

Ensemble averages reported for the reactant basin and dividing surface are obtained from KC-RPMD sampling trajectories that are run for at least 20 ns and 4 ns with a time step of 1 fs and 0.5 fs, respectively. The reactant basin corresponds to configurations for which the auxiliary electronic variable is constrained to $y = -1$, while the kink-pair dividing surfaces configurations are constrained to $y = 0$ (22, 23).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. This work was supported by the NIH under Award R01DK019038 (to H.B.G. and J.R.W.) and by the NSF under Award CHE-1611581 (to T.F.M.). Additional support was provided by NIH Grant GM095037 (to J.J.W.), the Arnold and Mabel Beckman Foundation, and NSF Grant DGE-1144469 (to J.S.K.).

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